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ABSTRACT

The nature of classroom assessment is changing. Teachers are being urged to rely less on traditional tests and more on innovative measurement methods, such as performance tests and portfolio assessments. This digest describes a strategy whereby student services personnel can play a leadership role in familiarizing classroom teachers and school administrators with the payoffs and perils of emerging classroom assessment methods. School counselors can play a key role in promoting better use of new assessment procedures if they acquire a reasonable degree of knowledge about such measurement procedures, then dispense that knowledge to the teachers with whom they work. More knowledgeable use of new classroom assessment strategies will lead to more accurate assessment-based inferences about students and more defensible instructional decisions by teachers. (JBJ)

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ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE ON Counseling And Student Services

ERIC DIGEST

1995 EDO-CG-95-8

New Assessment Methods for School Counselors

W. James Popham

Overview

The nature of classroom assessment is changing. Teachers today are being urged to rely less on traditional tests, such as those containing multiple-choice, true-false, and essay items. Instead, teachers are being encouraged to embrace innovative measurement methods, including performance tests and portfolio assessments. School counselors, if they are proactive, can help make sure that the newer assessment approaches teachers are beginning to adopt will be used in a manner that benefits students.

Many classroom teachers have never completed a formal measurement course during either their preservice or inservice classwork (Schafer & Lissitz, 1987). Not surprisingly, therefore, many teachers test their students using the same assessment procedures that they encountered during their own student days. That assessment approach is essentially a "test 'em as I was tested" strategy. It works pretty well as long as teachers are employing fairly traditional assessment methods because most teachers have been on the receiving end of more than a few of those traditional tests. But what happens when teachers try to use assessment procedures with which they have had no experience?

That is the area in which school counselors can make a meaningful contribution to the assessment acumen of the teachers with whom they work. In this digest a strategy will be described whereby student service personnel can play a leadership role in familiarizing classroom teachers and school administrators with both the payoffs and the perils of emerging classroom assessment methods.

A Special Role for Counselors

As a rule, school counselors are far more conversant with educational measurement concepts than are classroom teachers. Counselors have usually completed courses in testing (Schafer & Lissitz, 1987), and thus are not intimidated when someone talks about a validity or reliability coefficient. And all counselors know that a standard deviation is really not some sort of routine psychosis. Their familiarity with measurement procedures places counselors in a special position of perceived competence. That is, many teachers regard school counselors as experts when it comes to measurement—and that expertise is thought to include the new forms of measurement that teachers are now being urged to use. Consequently, many classroom teachers will be turning to counselors for guidance regarding the nontraditional assessment approaches they are often being told to employ. If school counselors want to make a contribution to dealing with this assessment issue, they will need to get up to speed immediately with respect to the most common of the new assessment methods, namely, performance tests and portfolios.

There are a number of books that have recently been published dealing with the innards of performance testing and portfolio assessment (e.g., Airasian, 1994; Marzano et al., 1993; Popham, 1995; Stiggins, 1994). By consulting one or more of these texts, and by focusing on their performance tests and portfolios sections, it will be possible for most counselors to acquire sufficient understanding of those two assessment approaches rapidly so that they can provide solid support for teachers. In addition, there are several digests in this special ERIC/CASS series (by Arter, by Lester and Perry, and by Stiggins) that are specifically devoted to these newer assessment approaches. Those digests provide not only useful insights regarding those assessment methods, but also identify a series of references for further reading.

To illustrate the kinds of understandings that school counselors need to acquire if they are to help their teacher colleagues deal with recent assessment advances, let us briefly consider performance tests. A performance test typically presents a task to students that calls for a relatively complex constructed response from students in the form of, for instance, an oral report or, perhaps, some sort of written analysis. Students' constructed responses must then be scored so that teachers can make accurate inferences about the degree to which their students possess the knowledge and/or skills assessed by the performance test.

What counselors need to know about performance assessments is: (1) how to construct the tasks for such tests; (2) how to score students' responses to those tasks; and (3) how to judge whether the performance test is a good one, that is, whether it contributes evidence that allows a teacher to make an accurate inference about a student's abilities.

Counselors should also understand the difficulty of devising and scoring such performance tests. As anyone who has scored many students' written compositions will agree, the judgment of students' composition skills is quite difficult. And yet, because we have had more than a

decade's worth of experience in scoring students' writing samples, educators have worked out some fairly serviceable scoring procedures for judging students' written compositions. However, with many of the newly devised performance tasks, the difficulty of generating consistent and accurate scoring procedures is considerable. This is because of the distinctiveness of the tasks involved and, more importantly, due to our lack of experience in appraising students' responses to such tasks. Teachers need to know about such practical obstacles—and a knowledgeable counselor can inform teachers about those problems.

Let's also consider portfolios. There's much more to portfolio assessment than merely dumping a collection of student work into a manila folder. By reading about portfolio assessment, for example, counselors will learn ways of scoring the diverse student products typically found in portfolios. Counselors will also discover that many portfolio specialists believe the most significant payoff of portfolio assessment is its contribution to the student's development of self-evaluation skills. In order to foster such self-evaluation growth, the criteria for appraising portfolio products must be crisply spelled out by teachers and provided to students well in advance of the portfolio's preparation.

Portfolio conferences between the teacher and student, or even between two students, usually play a significant role in portfolio assessment strategies. Counselors will need to learn how to help teachers plan for and carry out such portfolio conferences. Counselors, obviously, need to become knowledgeable about the chief features of portfolio assessment.

The level of sophistication that a school counselor must acquire regarding portfolios and performance tests need not be off-puttingly high. Most classroom teachers do not really care about the psychometric nuances of performance tests or portfolio assessments when such schemes are employed in a statewide accountability program (e.g., Koretz et al., 1994). What classroom teachers do need to know are the nuts and bolts of performance testing and portfolio assessment as well as the strengths and weaknesses of those new assessment methods. It really should not take counselors more than a few hours of serious reading, followed by an hour or two of semi-serious thinking, to prepare themselves so they can help classroom teachers regarding these newer assessment approaches.

Whether the counselor's assistance is rendered on an individual, ad hoc basis or in a formal workshop setting will depend on the local situation. But whether a formal or informal professional development scheme is employed, a school counselor who proactively prepares to provide guidance regarding performance and portfolio assessment will clearly be in a position to supply such assistance. Counselors who do not know about portfolios or performance tests will not be able to help.

One of the eight national goals for U.S. education authorized in 1994 by the Goals 2000: Educate America Act deals with the importance of continuing professional development for teachers. Specifically, the Goals 2000 legislation calls for teachers to remain abreast, among other things, of "emerging forms of assessment." Counselor-supplied succor regarding recent assessment advances would be most timely.

Summary

Because educators are being urged to add performance testing and portfolio assessment to their classroom assessment repertoires, many teachers will need assistance in acquiring the ability to implement such measurement techniques. School counselors can play a key role in promoting better use of these new assessment procedures if they acquire a reasonable degree of knowledge about such measurement procedures, then dispense that knowledge to the teachers with whom they work. More knowledgeable use of new classroom assessment strategies will lead to more accurate assessment-based inferences about students and, as a consequence, more defensible instructional decisions by teachers.

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